

Fact Sheet Denmark

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Greenland prepares for self-government

Greenland is not particularly green. The world's largest island (2.18 mill. km²) has 1.83 mill. km² of eternal snow, one great sheet of ice. The rest of Greenland is in fact brown, green or white according to location and time of year. And it is here - in what the Greenlanders themselves call Land of the People - that the population of Greenland lives. Altogether 50,000 inhabitants of whom one-fifth have been imported from Denmark. They are scattered along a 39,000-km coastal region in 122 towns and settlements and a number of weather stations. The capital town is Godthaab, which also has the largest population, 9000 inhabitants of whom 3000 were born in Denmark. But apart from its tiny population, Greenland is the land of big figures. The distance from the most northerly to the most southerly point is 2670 km - equivalent to the distance from Copenhagen to well down into the Sahara. The variety in climate is almost as striking. In northern Greenland and up on the icecap, where temperatures have been measured as low as -70° C and fluctuations of 47° occur within a few days, all life exists at the very extreme limit of possibility.

Early inhabitants: Vikings and Mongols

In southern Greenland, which is on the same latitude as Oslo, there are deep fjords, green valleys and low woodland (willows and birches 2-3 m in height). It was in these green parts that Eric the Red, banished from his native Iceland for murder, hit upon the name 'Greenland' when he established a colony 1000 years ago. At one time it had developed into a widespread community of 280 farms but in the course of five centuries the colony blossomed, dwindled and eventually died out completely for hitherto inexplicable reasons.

Greenland was uninhabited when Eric the Red guided his colonists in their double-ender Viking vessels, laden with horses, cattle, sheep, goats and heathen customs into the fjords of south Greenland.

But at about the same time another people - in slim, swift kayaks - were landing in the far north. They founded

what was later identified as the Thule culture. Their descendants are the Greenlanders we know today.

No one can be sure where they came from. Their language reveals no certain clue as to their origin but Mongolian links are plain and undeniable. The Eskimos - the people from the sea - had come to stay. Neither the Scandinavian settlers nor the inhospitable climate and geography could hold them back - but the Danish welfare-state treatment has all but eliminated their special characteristics. So nowadays we refer to them not as Eskimos but as Greenlanders.

Scandinavians withdrawn

The two cultures lived side by side in war and peace and love for several centuries until the Norse culture disappeared in the twilight of history and contact with Europe - six vessels a year from Norway - was suspended for 100 years. By 1500 A.D. the Norsemen had withdrawn completely from the scene, leaving only the Eskimos.

Greenland had come under the Danish-Norwegian throne in the 14th century but until the country was rediscovered by such British explorers as Martin Frobisher (1578) and John Davis (1585) it existed only in legend, saga and the wildest fantasies of imaginative map-makers. The theory was held that there was an unbroken stretch of polar land from Russia to America - but then came the era of the whaler, the hunt began for oil for the lamps of Europe. A century-long drama splashed with blubber, blood and gin washed the western coasts of Greenland, with the Eskimos looking on in wonder. Ten thousand Europeans - chiefly Dutchmen - landed anything up to 1000 massive whales annually. Whalebone was used to stiffen the corsets of European women, and whale oil lit up medieval darkness.

Rewriting the Lord's Prayer

Eventually Dutch enterprise began proving too much for the Danish monarch, and in 1721 the Norwegian missionary Hans Egede was dispatched to Greenland to colonise the country.

He began by converting the Green-

landers to Christianity. And it was no easy job. Even the most common prayers had to be rewritten. "Give us this day our daily bread" became "Give us this day our daily meat", and "the Lamb of God" became "the Seal of God" - because the Eskimo knew of neither bread nor lambs.

A number of colonies were established in western Greenland, leading insular, quiet lives. One of the basic principles of Danish colonial policy was that the country should remain isolated in order to protect the wellbeing of the Eskimo-Greenlanders, who well into the 20th century lived in the style of their forefathers, who had spent 1000 years hunting the seal, whale, reindeer and birds. Everything was utilised to the extreme. Meat as food, oil for lamps and heating, skins for clothing, tents, kayaks and umiaks. Winter quarters were huts of turf and stone. In summer the settlement moved inland with skin-covered tents, hunting reindeer and fishing for salmon. For 200 years Greenland was cut off from the changes of the modern world. It took two world wars to open the country up.

The Danish state held a monopoly on trade with Greenland but at the same time it had an obligation to ensure supplies of all essential commodities - a duty that still applies. Today it is not enough to ship a cargo of powder, musket-balls, needles, pots and pans across 4000 km of sea. Everything you find on the shelves of a European supermarket, you may expect to see in grocery stores in Greenland.

From colony to Danish county

The crucial political reform came in 1953 when Greenland, instead of being a colony, changed its status to a county of Denmark. At the same time Greenland won the right to return its own members to Folketing (parliament) in Copenhagen. Other, minor reforms had preceded this major change. About mid-19th century a form of local government had been set up in limited areas. The Greenlanders got their own written language, their own newspaper and own printing facilities. Two teacher-training colleges were set up for the education

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of Greenland teachers, and by the end of the century every Greenlander could read and write his or her own language. Two regional councils were set up, with wider powers than smaller, local authorities, and in the 1953 reform the regional councils were combined to form an all-Greenland council with even greater powers of self-determination. With the change in status from colony to county, Greenland was now an integral part of the kingdom of Denmark, and the monopoly of the Royal Greenland Trading Co. was broken. At the same time Greenland began losing some of its own special character. A Danish-Greenland joint commission, after a period of study, had produced county status and one huge building site. Thousands of Danish workers invaded the sleepy settlements of western Greenland over the next few years, blasting and dynamiting sites for hospitals, schools, housing, power stations, roads, harbours, factories. The first aim of the new 1953 administration was to eliminate the great Greenland illness: tuberculosis. In a decade it had been almost wiped out – at the same time housing standards had risen beyond measure.

From kayak to trawler

A Danish-driven bulldozer culture rolled out the path for development of Greenland. Everything went so quickly, the native Greenlanders did not stand a chance of keeping up with the changes. They were mere bystanders. Passive.

It is easier to install electricity than graft on a new way of living, and a whole generation of untrained, meagerly educated Greenlanders just about buckled under. The only medicine that could help was education and job-training.

A massive programme of education was launched in the early 1960s. The school system in Greenland was expanded, and thousands of young Greenlanders were sent to Denmark for further education. As new towns grew and developed, so did a new generation of better equipped Greenlanders. And they are still growing; 40 % of the population of Greenland are children under the age of 15 years.

The Greenlander's natural way of life and existence has also altered. Since mid-20th century the climate of western Greenland has become slightly warmer – sending the seal, a vital factor in everyday life, swimming north to colder waters. Its place has been taken by cod and

salmon, and with economic assistance from the Danish government, Greenlanders have jumped in a few short years from their kayaks to motor fishing vessels and modern trawlers – selling their catches to the well-equipped fish-processing industries of western Greenland. Exports of salmon, cod, shrimps, halibut and other heavy-demand fish varieties have an annual value of several hundred million kroner. The traditional life of the sealer and hunter is largely unchanged in northern and eastern Greenland, but Greenland as a whole is gradually moving into the industrial age – for better or worse – with periods of mass unemployment alternating with other periods of over-employment and shortage of manpower.

Economically, Greenland is by no means self-supporting. It receives annual grants from metropolitan Denmark totalling D.kr. 1,000 million; Greenland exports on the other hand amount to D.kr. 500 million – although most of this (kr. 300 million) stems from exports of lead and zinc from the Black Angel mining establishment in northern Greenland.

The world's largest island is rich in minerals but far from fully explored. Hopes are pinned firmly on finding large reserves of oil, and many foreign oil companies have been awarded concessions to explore territorial waters off the west coast of Greenland. Some exploratory wells have been drilled – so far without yielding a single drop of oil.

The inevitable shock of jumping straight from Stone Age to Nuclear Era, with vast educational improvements and radical changes in social conditions in the settlements of western Greenland, has brought in its wake a demand for greater self-determination.

Self-government for Greenland

The Greenlander wants to stand on his own feet – not propped up on a pair of Danish crutches. He wants self-government on the lines of that practised in the Faroe Islands, another outpost of the Danish kingdom. A commission was appointed in 1972 to study the prospect and consequences of self-government; it comprised only Greenland politicians, including the native-born Minister for Greenland Affairs, Knud Hertling. The commission recommended that Danish politicians also turned their attention to the issue of home rule for Greenland. The result of preliminary studies is that Greenland is likely to become self-

governing in 1979 – capping 30 years' preparation for the event.

The recommendation of a joint Danish-Greenland parliamentary commission was that the Danish Folketing (parliament) should relinquish part of its powers and invest them in self-government legislation – in effect a Greenland constitution. Greenland would remain under the Danish crown and would continue to have the administrative status of a Danish county.

The present national council in Greenland will be superseded by a legislature with legislative powers but still subject to the Danish constitution.

The Greenland legislature will legislate in spheres for which it is responsible and which it finances independently.

The legislature will comprise 18–21 members, who will appoint from among their number a national governing body of 3–4 members (who may be either men or women), with a national chairman elected for the same four-year period of office as the national government.

As in the case of the Faroes, Greenland will also have a senior administrative officer – a Danish civil servant – appointed by and representing the Danish state. Areas in which the new Greenland government will be able to legislate initially include fisheries policy, control of fishing off Greenland, conservation and the environment.

In other spheres the Danish Folketing will first pass enabling legislation after which the Greenland government will be empowered to issue regulations. This would apply, for example, in the case of education, the social services, broadcasting, business policy (including manufacture and export), and the health service.

As far as any profits realised from exploitation of mineral deposits are concerned, the government in Greenland and the Danish government would negotiate a distribution ratio.

After the Greenland Self-government Bill has been presented in Folketing, it will be submitted to a referendum in Greenland.

Erik Erngaard

Erik Erngaard is a journalist and former editor of the newspaper, Atuagagdliutit/Groenlands Posten, and the news department of Greenland Radio. He is also the author of the book, "Greenland then and now", Lademann, 1972.

Greenland is a vast, uninhabited land. The first human habitation is believed to have been by the Vikings, who arrived in the 10th century. They were followed by the Norsemen, who stayed for a few centuries. The land was then abandoned and remained uninhabited until the 18th century, when the Danes arrived and established a colony. Greenland is now a self-governing territory of Denmark.

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